

# THE HERMIT'S CHRISTMAS



DAVID DE FOREST BURRELL

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HERMIT'S CHRISTMAS

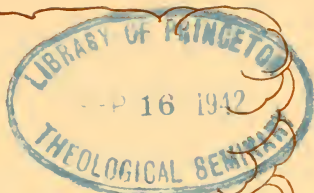


*Merry Christmas!*  
*Yours, Davey.*









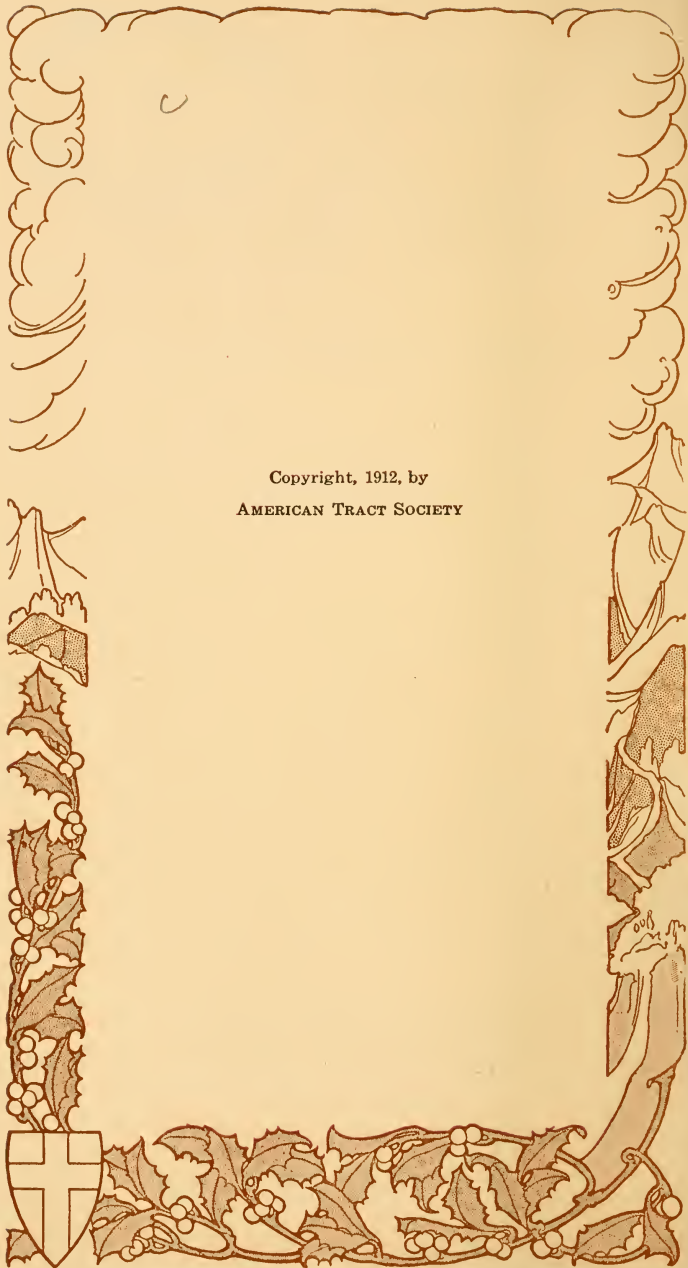
# THE HERMIT'S CHRISTMAS

DAVID DE FOREST BURRELL

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## THE HERMIT'S CHRISTMAS

ON Christmas Day the solitude of the hermit Theodore was broken in upon.

The hermit, a gaunt, austere figure of a man in a long robe of goat's hair, stood before the door of his cave upon the heights, looking out over the wooded slopes and the shining waters at their feet, when the first intruder made his appearance. The sunlight glanced from his armor where he came out from the forest shadows on a bare shoulder of the mountain far below. The gleam caught the hermit's eye, and, without moving, he watched while the man drew nearer. He climbed but slowly under the weight of his armor. About his head a white

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cloth was wrapped as security against the hot sun, while his helmet was slung at his back. His great sword he used for a staff.

At length, stumbling over the last stone in utter weariness, he reached the hermit's side and threw himself upon the ground, calling hoarsely for water, in the name of all the saints. The hermit brought it, a gourd full, which the Crusader drank dry in great gulps. He wiped his face, red and shining from the exertion of his climb.

"God bless thee for that kindly draft, good father."

"Nay, my son, 'tis but a small Christmas gift, since it cost me naught save a journey to the spring below."

The knight started.

"I had forgot! Christmas Day, in sooth! and what a place to keep it in!"

"The place matters not, my son, so that thy heart be right for the feast."

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The other's eyes twinkled for a moment.

"And dost thou feast on Christmas Day, father? Methought dried peas and, perchance, a cut of goat's flesh would be dainties fitted to thy scruples."

The hermit smiled.

"Why, so they are; but truly the food matters little more than the place."

Then the knight sighed loudly.

"Ah, but I bethink me," he said, "of a great hall in Merry England, and the boar's head and the foaming ale and the songs and laughter! I would I were there, across yon blue sea!"

The hermit smiled again.

"Truly, Sir Knight, dried goat's flesh is not a boar's head, and this gourd I take from thee is not a horn of ale; but this is Christmas Day, and thou art welcome."

"And I will stay, good father, and dine with thee! but in truth I had meant so to do, an the her-

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mit's face were not too long." He glanced up, sidelong, at the hermit's solemn visage above him. "Yonder, on the road by the sea, lies my horse with a broken leg. God's mercy that he did not break my skull when he fell! I saw a path leading away through the forest toward the mountain, and as all paths on Athos do now but lead to hermits' caves, 'twas but a short moment before I turned my steps hitherward."

There was a sound of feet clambering up the rocky way. A voice reached them, harsh and nasal, uttering loud curses upon lands where Christian hospitality dwelt in caves on mountain-tops. Then an unkempt head came into view, followed by a body clothed in rags and patches.

The hermit greeted the newcomer after the fashion of the East: "Peace to thee."

The man paused to get his breath, and answered, "Thou art set on high indeed, holy father.



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'Twere more friendly to set thy cave by the roadside below."

"Make thy complaint to God who made the cave, thou unmanly rascal!" the knight interrupted, jumping to his feet. "By thy costume thou art a beggar. Go thou and beg of richer men."

"Peace, peace!" said the hermit. "All men are beggars at my door—and all are guests—and all are welcome."

"Then thou shalt have a full table for thy Christmas dried peas, father, for yonder come more of thy guests."

The hermit and the beggar looked down where he pointed. Up the steep path toiled four men, one after the other. The three above stood waiting their arrival. At length they came. The knight checked them off in an undertone as the hermit gave to each his kindly "Peace to thee!"

"Thou art a merchant, and wealthy, by thy girth"—so ran

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the commentary—"and thou—a thief, by thine eyes and thy nearness to Sir Merchant. And thou—thou art I know not what, but thou hast broken heart written on thy face. And thou art a thinker, by thy broad brow and thy slender figure."

One after another they returned the hermit's greeting, each after his kind. He whom the knight called merchant offered bluntly to pay for a good meal; the thief spoke with oily heartiness; the broken-hearted said never a word; and he of the broad brow and the uncalled fingers responded with the courtesy of one at home in any place.

"A fair Christmas Day, good sirs," quoth the hermit then; "and all I have for your Christmas feast! Come hither into the shade of the rock and sit ye down."

And without further parley down they sat upon the brown earth, a strange company, while the hermit brought from his cave



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a great dish of dried meat, and a bowl of parched peas, and lastly an earthen jar of water, cool and sparkling. The beggar made as if to put his hand to the dish of meat, when the hermit stayed him.

"An it please you," he said gravely, "we will thank the Christ who was born this day."

The beggar withdrew his hand. The fat merchant, who had thought to put forth his own, withheld it. With bowed head they waited until the brief prayer was done, then set to as hungry men, one and all.

"Tough, but grateful to an empty stomach, is thy goat's meat," said the man of the broad brow. "But tell me, Father Hermit, thou didst return thanks for dried meat and peas: dost in very truth regard this mean repast as a Christmas feast?"

"That do I!" returned the hermit vigorously.

"That do I not!" said the other in a sneer half hidden in his

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beard, "no more do these my fellow-guests, I warrant you. Tell me, friend knight, hast any thought of Christmas in thy mind?"

"Nay," said the knight frankly; "only of a snow-white, crisp Christmas at home."

"Sir Beggar? Is this a Christmas joy to thee?"

"Nay," said the beggar with a whine; "but were I in my own town—ah, there beggar-folk feast at Christmas-tide at the cost of the open-handed rich!"

"Sir Merchant, what of thee? Is this Christmas to thy mind?"

"Nay," said the merchant between bites, "never a Christmas without good roast capon."

"Sir Melancholy? Hast thou Christmas cheer? Nay, we need not thine answer. And thou, Sir Shifty Eyes—is this Christmas to thee?"

"Nay," said the last of all, "I see no Christmas joy in this shrivelled fare."

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"Hearest thou, O Father Hermit?" cried the questioner in triumph. "And thou sayest this brings Christmas joy to thee!"

"And truly so it does!" answered the hermit quietly. Then, his eyes sweeping quickly around the circle, he spoke more strongly: "And more, Sir Philosopher—for such I take thee to be—I can tell each of you why he has no Christmas joy from this feast of mine."

"Come, then," said the philosopher invitingly.

"Thou first," said the hermit, not heeding the sneer no longer concealed—"thou art a philosopher, is it not so?—So I thought.—And thou hast exchanged faith for reason, and by thy bargain thou hast lost thy Christ and thy Christmas. Thou wast afraid to believe! God manifest in the flesh thou couldst not understand, and therefore God manifest in the flesh thou didst cast away."

The other would have interrupted, but the hermit raised his

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hand to silence him. "Nay, I said not I would argue with thee, but that I would show thee why thou hast no Christmas joy. And I have shown thee. Thou hast no faith: that is why. Thou, who dost come over yonder blue sea by faith; who dost follow a mountain path on faith;—thou, who dost not know thyself nor thy neighbor nor thy world, but dost take all on faith—thou dost not believe in the might of the finger of God! Not a day passes but thou dost believe the unexplainable; yet thou must explain the Christ-child before thou wilt believe on him! Thou dost not know me; thou canst not explain one of these dried peas, nor the way it grew, nor the sunlight that dried it; and yet thou dost eat my dried peas gladly! Have I hit thee? 'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of heaven as a——', "

He paused for a moment. The philosopher's eyes had fallen; his

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sneer was gone; he had not a word to say. The hermit turned to the thief, who sat next in the circle, and shot his next words at him.

"And thou, I know thine ailment, and why thou hast no Christmas joy in thy feast! Thou hast stolen money in thy srip and a bad conscience in thy breast."

The man with the shifty eyes gripped his wallet tight and turned pale under his tan.

"Nay, friend thief," said the hermit more gently, "this is no court of law. There is no judge here but thy God. Thou art afraid to meet the Christ-child when thou comest to judgment; that is why thou hast no joy in this Christmas-tide. Clear conscience doth make glad heart. Get thee back and restore what thou hast stolen!"

His eyes sought those of him of the melancholy countenance, but the man would not look up. Nevertheless the hermit addressed him, knowing that he heard.



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"And thou, Sir Melancholy, methinks I know thy sorrow. Thou dost think thyself disillusioned. Sorrow has come thy way, and loneliness. Thy friends have proven no friends at all. And because thou hast lost faith in man, thou hast lost faith in God, and thou hast forgotten the faith of thy childhood. Thou hast drunk wormwood and therefore thou dost curse God."

The man had lifted his head and was gazing at him, his embittered hungry soul in his eyes. The hermit's tone softened.

"Oh, thou poor soul!" he said, "thou hast done the very opposite to what thou shouldst have done. For instead of false friends thou hast a Friend divine. Thy house is empty; yet thy Friend but keeps thy dear ones for thee till thou comest. Thou hast looked only at the things which are seen; but lift thine eyes! look thou at the things which are not seen, the eternal things of God!"

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Then hast thou, even thou, bereaved and lonely, joy in the Birthday of thy Lord!"

He ceased speaking. Suddenly the other bowed his head upon his arms and was shaken by great tearing sobs. They sat in silence until he raised his head and said, brokenly, and trying to smile, "Thou hast wrought a miracle, father! These be the first tears mine eyes have known in many a year."

"I guessed as much," the hermit said, "and tears be often the forerunners of a new joy."

The Crusader sat next in the circle. With the help of the beggar he had undone the thongs on his armor and stripped himself of his shining coat of mail. In his woolen shirt, worn and marked with rust, he was a picture of stalwart strength, with knotted muscles and heavy shoulders.

"Thou," began the hermit, "thou, Sir Knight, hast been to Jerusalem, across yonder waters,

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to protect the sepulcher of thy Lord Christ, whose Birthday this is. And thou dost not know thy Lord; wherefore thou hast no joy in Him."

"Not know my Lord!" cried the knight.

"Nay, thou knowest not thy Lord! By two things I know it and will prove it thee. Imprimis, thou hast slain thy fellow-men, and hast waded in their blood, for the sake of thy God. Wherefore thou knowest not Him; for the Christ is not served by blood-letting, by the slaying of thy brothermen. Thou dost hate the Saracen who dishonors thy Lord's tomb; but thy Lord has bidden thee love the Saracen, and thou hast not heard his voice. Again, thy Lord Christ would have thee kindly and tender toward all, both man and beast; but thou hast left thy good steed, who has borne thee to thy Lord's city and thus far homeward—thou hast left him lying down yonder with a broken



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limb and hast not put him out of his misery. Wherefore, again, thou dost not know thy Lord; not knowing Him, thou canst have none of his joy at his birth-feast! Wert thou Christ's man, as thou dost wear Christ's cross, thou wouldst ere this have cared for thy beast!"

At that the knight leaped to his feet.

"By this cross," he cried, "but thou art a bold man, Sir Hermit!"

His sword was in his hand. The hermit made no move. The others sat watching the shining blade. The knight caught the hermit's eye, hesitated, dropped his sword with a clatter, and turned and strode down the path out of sight.

The hermit turned to the merchant.

"And thou, sir," he said, "I have thy measure an I mistake not; and the reason why thou hast no joy in this feast. Thou hast

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so encased thy soul in the fat of getting and of self-indulgence that thou hast forgotten it. Thou hast lived for thyself. Thy treasure-chest thou hast filled, and thou hast wrung thy gold from the sweat and tears of many a brother-man. God gave thee thy talents, but thou hast not requited God. Thou art swollen with what thou hast sucked from God's world. Thy pride is in what thou callest thine own, and thy joy in spending it for what thou callest thyself. Thou knowest not the Christ-child; for the Christ bids thee give, not get; and thou hast not found joy in this feast, for thou hast through it all thought only of thyself! The joy of Christ's Birthday will come when thou forgettest thyself!"

And the merchant, when the hermit ceased speaking, grew very red in the face and fingered his wallet uncomfortably. But he had not a word to say.

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"And thou, Sir Beggar," went on the voice of the hermit, "thou hast, like thy neighbor, lived by sucking the world dry. Thou hast taken from the world and given nothing. God made thee to work, but thou hast disdained to work. Thy mind is rich with excuses and reasons, but none is good: thou art a lazy varlet and a selfish one. Therefore thou knowest not the Christ. For He was a carpenter, and his hands were hard with toil. He saved men, not lived on them, yonder in Nazareth. And none has right to joy on Christmas-tide who has no respect for himself and no joy in honest toil. Stretch out thy hand to the plow, not to ask an alms! Let thy brow shine with the sweat of thy work for the Christ; then shalt thou taste his joy! He has given himself to thee, and thou—thou art a beggar!"

He was done. He turned to the philosopher with a quiet smile.

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"Have I not kept my word?" he asked.

The other nodded slowly, then lifted his chin with a challenge: "In truth thou hast, good host. But I, too, am a student of men; and I have a flaw to pick in thine own case."

The hermit's smile faded from his lips. He seemed for the moment to draw into himself; and he spoke in a low voice.

"Nay," he said; "I said not I was perfect; nor even that I gathered from this poor feast all that I might have gained of joy. It has been the better for your presence; and yet—I too confess I have known happier feasts."

It was the philosopher's turn to smile, but he had lost his sneer, and he did not smile.

"Thou hast withdrawn thyself, Sir Hermit," he said not ungently, "from the world and its snares. Thou wast weak, and the evil in the world drew thee, and thy conscience troubled thee; and thou

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didst flee, like many others, to the wilderness. Is it not so?"

He did not wait for a reply, but leaned forward and pointed his words with a long, slender finger. "And thou too hast lost—not all, but much, of the joy of this feast because thou hast been a coward! A coward! Thou wast afraid! Though thy Lord fought through forty days and forty nights of temptation; though he did agonize for thee in the garden; though he did show thee how to fight thy soul's battles—thou didst run away to the desert! Thou hadst a place to fill, a work to do, men to serve, a Gospel to preach—and thou wast afraid! And thou hast but a part of thy joy to-day because thou hast forgotten that the Christ-child whose feast this is was born to succor thee in thy temptations! Thou hast no right to this feast! Thou shouldst be at thy work in the world! Thy Christ hath a work for thee!"



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A silence fell upon them. The hermit seemed to have shrunk into himself. Absently he rolled a parched pea between fingers none too steady. His voice trembled when at length he spoke.

"I stand like you all, convicted. We be but poor Christians all. I had thought to keep my soul pure by fleeing evil; but"—and his voice grew clear and strong—"I was wrong. I shall go back! I shall go back to serve my Lord Christ! And you, brothers? What of you all? Will ye go back with me to serve our Lord and our brothers?"

He looked around the little circle. None answered for a moment; then the sorrowful man said, "I will go." "And I," said the thief; and the others nodded without speaking, all save the philosopher, who sat with head bent, deep in some soul struggle.

"Come," said the merchant briskly; "an I can break my chain, so canst thou."

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"Nay, friend," said the philosopher sadly; "it is not chains, but the absence of chains, that I feel. Could I but bind my soul to thy Christ—but how can I? Can a man force his soul to accept a mystery his mind rejects?"

Then spoke the sorrowful man, with a new and more cheerful tone in his voice.

"Ay, that he can! That have I done but now! Truly my mind cannot see heaven and mine own in heaven; but I am weary of guesswork. I will believe and hope. And thou—with all thy knowledge thou art no wiser as to God: thy mind saveth thee not: trust thou thy faith."

"That were wisdom," said the hermit slowly. "We speak to thee, and thou dost not bid us explain ourselves before thou wilt hear: and the Christ speaketh to thee on this his Day. Wilt thou argue? Nay, but believe!"

And the philosopher looked up at them again, and his brow cleared.

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"Why, good father, the world was not built in a day. I will be honest with thee: I cannot believe; but I will pray Christ to help me believe. Is it enough?"

"I am but a poor fool," spoke the beggar, "and thou a philosopher, and yet—if thou dost pray to Christ thou dost believe already."

"And that, again, is wisdom," quoth the hermit.

So they sat and talked while the shadows moved 'round the mountain and the sun began to sink over the sea to the west.

"When the sun goeth down we journey into the world," the hermit said.

Toward twilight they heard the footsteps of the soldier, and his bronzed face appeared at the head of the path. He halted for a moment, surveying the scene. They were on their feet, girding themselves for the descent.

"What now?" he cried, when he could get his breath.



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The philosopher spoke for all. "We have been to school, Sir Knight, as thou hast, and we have learned that on this Christmas Day which takes us back to the world. Wilt come?"

"So," said the knight, the old twinkle in his eye; "and what hast thou learned, O wise one?"

"That the joy of the Christmas feast may be found in dried peas if faith be there at table."

"And thou, Sir Beggar?"

"That the joy of the Christmas feast is his who hath honest sweat upon his brow."

"And thou, Sir Merchant?"

"That the joy of the Christmas feast lieth not in the viands, but in finding joy for others."

"And thou, Sir Melancholy?"

"That there may be joy in the Christmas feast, even for the bitter in soul, if they look not backward, but forward."

"And thou, Sir—craving thy pardon—Sir Thief?"

"It was a good guess," said the

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thief. His eyes met the soldier's squarely. "But I have learned. There is no Christmas joy without an honest conscience."

"And thou, good host?"

"They have taught me, Sir Knight! There is no fulness of joy for him who shirks the fight. We go together back to life. Wilt go?"

The knight stooped for his coat of mail. "An some friend here will harness me, I will go, and gladly. Thou hast taught me, too, good father. The Christ whose Birthday we keep joyeth not in hatred, but in love and kindness to all. Verily, what a school thou keepest! Thou hast shown us the soul of Christmas! Master and scholars, all for the world this Christmas Day! God give us joy of our journey!"

So, in the cool of the evening, they filed down from the hermit's cave to the road that led to the world!



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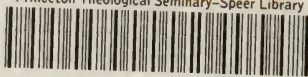
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